THE MEMORIAL CHAPEL OF THE HOLY COMMUNION

2631 Wharton Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19146

Office: DE 4-1054

September 30, 1985

To the Clergy and People of the Southwark Deanery

Dear Friends,

At the most recent gathering of the clergy of the Deanery, the subject of AIDS came up, particularly in relation to the use of the common cup when we celebrate Eucharist. A number of comments were made which led us to think that some information about the syndrome as it particularly touches us as Christian people might be timely and welcome. Since my primary avocation in the last three years has been to serve as Vice-President of the Philadelphia AIDS Task Force, I volunteered to try to put some pertinent thoughts together for our community.

As you may or may not know, the Center City-South Philadelphia area of the city— the community which we especially serve as Christ's ministers and in which many of us live as well— is the place in the greater Philadelphia metropolitan area in which much the greatest concentration of people with AIDS have lived and live at the time of diagnosis: this means that now nearly 150 people in our community are living with or dead of AIDS. About 60% of these people are dead: AIDS is an awesomely deadly syndrome.

It is also true that in Center City live the greatest concentration of gay men in the city (although our history of discrimination makes this a hard fact to document), and those of us who are gay and in any way sexually active are especially at risk. Many of us are members of the congregations of Southwark Deanery.

What does this mean for all of us?

First, AIDS is a syndrome apparently caused by a closely related group of viruses now identified variously as HTLV III, LAV, or just "the AIDS virus." The virus, ironically, is extremely fragile. <u>There is no evidence at all, after millions of contacts, that the viruses transmit through any casual common social contact at all</u>. The virus transmits only through direct blood tranmissions or through sexual contact in which semen, blood, and perhaps urine is exchanged. Therefore, and this I believe to be very important, no one should be discouraged from sharing the cup of the Lord at Eucharist, unless there is an open lesion of the oral cavity by which blood might be transmitted to a neighbor at Table. Nor is there any danger at all in drinking what remains of the wine at the end of Eucharist. The virus simply can't survive exposure to air and alcohol at all. That is a clear summary of the best epidemiological evidence available today.

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Second, and very closely related, is that in this moment of our corporate life together, gay men more than ever need the strong pastoral support of all of us, clergy and people, who do ministry in the Episcopal Church in this part of the world. This is particularly true of those who are Christians and Episcopalians insofar as our common life is concerned, but it is also true of all gay men (and other people at risk: IV drug users, hemophiliacs, and now, very sexually active heterosexual people) with whom we share the adventure of life in Philadelphia. So, rather than condemn and isolate us, I believe the church called in these days to a special ministry of love and concern and active support. Gay people are denied a part of our life every day. Many of us have absorbed cultural opprobrium and have come to believe it of ourselves. For some of us AIDS is a perfect metaphorical opportunity to become the people society and, sometimes ourselves, believe us to be: sick and deadly. Every day I counsel with people who have absorbed this metaphor and who are living it out—by self-isolating and self-hating behavior. I believe the church is called always to break down walls, to heal, to reconcile, to urge the abundant life of Christ in all our members. So we must, I suggest, oppose in ourselves and in our corporate practices any activity which could be interpreted as isolating and fearful and instead urge, as always, inclusion and love. (That is to say that to accept self-selection away from Communion by a gay man is to support homophobia and to urge tacitly a devestating isolation, and there are other examples just as pernicious.)

Third, you should know that people with AIDS are increasingly victims of harsh discrimination and rejection by employers, by landlords, by families and friends and partners or lovers and by religious communities. Clearly, all of us who are the Body of Christ must oppose this, actively and vigorously, and be the chief providers of love and support in concrete ways for people who have become too often 20th century lepers. Like the lepers of Jesus' time, people with AIDS, because of hatred and ignorance and fear, are isolated, scorned and finally left to die alone with their own kind. But Jesus' was clear, as I hope we will be, that our "own kind" are all the people of God.

Finally, I am enclosing a brochure about AIDS which may help to answer your questions. It is a bit dated but still accurate. More of these brochures are available at cost ($10./100) from the Task Force. I and other members of the

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Clergy Group of the Task Force are available to talk with you individually or in groups about AIDS. The Task Force also is available to work in a large variety of supportive ways with people with AIDS, with people suffering from ARC (AIDS-related complex), and with the "worried well." Please feel free to call me at 215 334 7454 to find out more, or simply call the Philadelphia AIDS HOTLINE, 215 232 8055. I also ask your support of the work we do at the Task Force. Most of the education about AIDS in the city has been done and continues to be done by us at no cost to the city, the taxpayer, or you. A huge portion of the cost has been borne by the gay community itself. But we are now actively caring for more than 60% of living people with AIDS in town, we are called more and more to educational efforts, we are defending several people in the courts against discrimination, and we are providing housing and nearly all expenses for a growing number of people. The private resources of the gay community will no longer do the job, and perhaps serve as well to support the false and dangerous notion that AIDS is a "gay disease." (Yesterday I heard the latest in a series of AIDS "jokes":Q:What does gay stand for? A:Got AIDS yet?) We need your help, and I know that I can rely on your generosity. We also need your help in supporting our attempt to involve the city and the Commonwealth in supporting the efforts we and others are making to control by education the spread of AIDS and mass hysteria about it and to support and care for those afflicted who need our help.

I believe that all of this falls under the rubric of ministry and I believe we are all called to a special ministry now. For this country, AIDS is the most serious crisis in public health in decades (polio pales by comparison), and it is increasingly a crisis of civil rights and moral responsibility as well. All of us who are especially at risk and who are called, with you, to Christ's ministry, deeply hope and daily pray for your witness to the fellowship and love of God.

It is in that witness that I write. Thank you always for your support.

Faithfully,

(The Rev.) James H. Littrell

Enclosure.
cc: The Bishop and Bishop Coadjutor-elect
The Standing Committee
The Deans